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ESSAY

Turner's Strawberry Hunt

By William Safire

WASHINGTON — Buried in the verbiage filling this space one week ago was the revelation that the Director of Central Intelligence, Stansfield Turner, (dubbed by ornithologists "The Double-Dipping Ringknocker") had spent a strange and tempestuous afternoon before a secret session of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Out of sorts and easily rattled, the intelligence chief left the impression that he agreed with Carter budgeteers who wanted to delay the new information-gathering system to bridge the verification gap created by the debacle in Iran. As a good ex-sailor, he went along with the cost-cutting requirements of his Commander in Chief and Annapolis colleague, but he was obviously uncomfortable with his anti-intelligence position before the incredulous senators.

Three senators called the White House to protest Turner's complacency as well as his shaken demeanor. Hedrick Smith of The New York Times uncovered an even more important part of the story: that Mr. Turner had admitted to the senators that the loss of our stations in Iran could not be replaced for years — a fact of great significance in the SALT debate, which is now centered on our ability to verify that the Russians are not cheating.

The White House Press Secretary then turned on Turner, too, for giving the senators an inch: Joseph L. Powell denounced The Times's story (which was too accurate for comfort) and the senators for leaking (the source of the original tip was not senatorial). He trotted out Defense Secretary Harold Brown to say, in effect, that the Director of Central Intelligence did not know what he was talking about.

That left Mr. Turner to suffer the fate of the sycophant: treated with contempt by senators and pundits for trying to justify the President's penny-wise delay, and treated with contempt by the White House for blurring out to senators even a part of the truth about our new difficulty in monitoring Soviet missile testing.

Twisting in that kind of wind, what's a poor masterspy to do? Some would salute the President, and complete the politicization of the agency that Turner began two years ago with a phony energy report; others would forthrightly tell the President that the D.C.I. should be a full-time spy and not a part-time pol, and should give both President and Congress his purely professional opinions. But Mr. Turner cannot decide, and his dithering must be tearing him apart.

A source at the C.I.A. sends me the "Notes from the Director," an unwittingly hilarious monthly message from Mr. Turner which is posted on agency bulletin boards. After decimating the clandestine services, he writes: "It is always sad to see old friends depart." After letting a clerk sell the manual for our top secret spy satellite to the Russians, he locked the barn door with: "I appreciate your cooperation in the inspection of briefcases and packages being taken out of our buildings." And always the note of press paranoia: "Do not despair of the criticisms you see in the media."

A parody of the Turner effusions recently appeared on the bulletin board. The parody, based on the Herman Wouk novel about another naval commander under stress, reads in part:

"I was in my office fairly exhausted last evening after stopping work at 10:00 P.M. As is my wont after a long day, I asked the steward to bring me a bowl of strawberries and cream . . . he shuffled back to report that someone had stolen the strawberries from my refrigerator. I deemed this a personal attack by someone who knew of my propensity for the fruit, using innocent strawberries to get at me.

"I am therefore ordering," continues the parody, "that until the strawberries are returned to my refrigerator, no one will leave the building. G.S.A. will be asked to augment meal service while we wait. . . . Any person helping to identify the thief will, besides an immediate quality step increase, be given a pair of stainless steel spheres similar to those I use for thinking the unpalatable thoughts our Communist adversaries force us to think."

"Chances are," the cruelly mocking memo concludes, "the pinko commie strawberry-fetish fink will see the error of his ways and surrender. I'd almost bet my navy pension on it."

Stansfield Turner — thin-skinned and testy, darkly suspicious of media-N.S.C.-White House-senatorial conspiracies — is not going bananas. He is not Captain Queeg.

But the poor fellow obviously needs a rest. After that, he needs a new assignment: perhaps a post on the Joint Chiefs, formerly a place requiring independent judgment, now a rubber-stamping grounds for SALT salesmen.

And now a message to the legion of depressed spooks on that molehill in Langley, Virginia: Remember, nobody in the building on Dzerzhinski Square in Moscow has the guts or wit to write a parody about the head of the K.G.B. Remember, as the hundred-flower children are arrested while trying to post protests in Peking, that every bulletin board in America is Democracy Wall. And remember that Turner, too, shall pass, and do not despair of the criticisms you see in the media.